

Sanders and Independent Politics

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Despite his relatively low poll numbers at the moment, Bernie Sanders' bid for the Democratic presidential nomination is catching fire and will undoubtedly attract a great many more supporters in the months to come. For radicals, and especially for socialists in the "third camp" tradition (so called from the time of the Cold War, when our tendency stood for revolutionary opposition to both camps) this poses a challenge. As longtime advocates of independent political action, how



should we relate to Sanders and his supporters? Barry Finger ("Further Reflections on the Sanders Campaign," New Politics online, May 26) offers an approach that while emphasizing political hostility to the Democratic Party nevertheless goes partially astray on this issue, in my opinion.

As Barry notes, the issue is not ideological "purity." Third camp socialists are often dismissed by other leftists as "purists" with impossibly high standards, because we have been opponents of Communist regimes, for example, and other authoritarian forces that don the mantle of socialism or anti-imperialism. What's wrong with these regimes isn't that they are "not good enough" on some scale of socialist virtue, but that they represent an *alternative* to socialism as we understand it – a system that maximizes the decision-making power that workers are able to exercise over their lives and governments. Similarly, any domestic political strategy that takes workers and other discontented elements back into the Democratic Party – which is fundamentally an arm of the ruling class, used to preserve the capitalist system and especially to discipline and neutralize those who might stray into opposition – points us in a different direction, away from class independence and mass empowerment.

More than in any other capitalist country, the left in the U.S. is marginal and, as far as most Americans are concerned, invisible. We tend to forget this when we attend large-scale events like the Left Forum, which are enlightening and often inspiring, but where we talk mainly to ourselves. Kshama Sawant's election was a major breakthrough for socialist and independent radical politics, but still only at the local level. Apart from Seattle residents and committed leftists, relatively few Americans have even heard of Sawant, and that includes liberal-minded people who regularly keep up with the news. For most people in this country, socialism is still inextricably associated with utopian fantasy or totalitarianism. And as yet, few can imagine any significant change in the neoliberal status quo – much as they might wish for it.

The key to changing this, the only way in which the left can begin to influence the thinking and activity of millions of people, is to promote initiatives that have the possibility of detaching significant sections of the working and lower middle classes from their mostly passive, predetermined party preferences, mainly their preference for the Democrats. Only within such a movement could socialist ideas begin to "make sense" as a *logical extension of what people have already done* – declared their political independence. In all likelihood, the initial programmatic basis for an independent political formation would be non-socialist, left-liberal reformism. But socialists would be a loyal opposition, as Barry says – that is, loyal to the goal of consistent and principled independence from the Establishment. Until that happens, socialists and the left will continue to participate in struggles for justice and equality, of course, and there will be some victories; but as far as making real progress is concerned, we will be spinning our wheels for the most part — as we have for a long time now, while the ruling elite arrogantly revels in virtually unchallenged domination.

This last point is worth stressing. Today, as is often observed, socialist ideas are enjoying a currency they have not had for 70 years or more. But as yet, even among Americans who find the socialist critique of capitalism appealing, very few can imagine socialism as a viable, achievable alternative. Having a new party of the left would radically expand the parameters of what people can conceive as “practical.”

Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter offered startling glimpses of the potential for social upheaval that lies just below the surface. No one could have predicted Occupy or the emergence of the Fight for \$15 campaigns, and the mushrooming protests of low wage workers. Police murders of Black people are nothing new, but the eruption of mass protest against these murders that has swept across the cities and towns of this country is unlike anything we have seen in decades. I’m not saying that anything and everything is possible. But neither do I think that independent political action initiatives must wait, or have no hope of gaining traction, until a mass nationwide social movement, like the antiwar movement of the 60s, appears. I also think that those who make this argument seriously underestimate the oppositional currents, both manifest and emerging, that exist today. Whatever one’s estimate of the level of struggle at this moment, it is imperative to organize a party-type formation as soon as possible, with whatever forces we have, so that we will be ready the next time an explosion, like that of Occupy, occurs. No matter how progressive Sanders’ program is, his campaign leads people in a *different* direction — away from political independence and back into the Democratic Party.

Barry claims that the Democratic Party can no longer portray itself convincingly, to its base, as a lesser evil – that its wholesale embrace of neoliberalism and austerity means that it can no longer perform its traditional function of coopting the left. It is true that the Democrats’ greater conservatism, their more blatant association with a corporate agenda, makes them more vulnerable to opposition from the left. And it may turn out that Hillary Clinton’s current impersonation of a populist will prove less convincing than previous performances by Democratic hopefuls. But Barry greatly underestimates the extent to which the Democrats can still maintain the allegiance of the left, however reluctant, on the basis of abortion rights, gay rights, Supreme Court nominations, climate change denial and, most centrally, the threat of right-wing Republican victories — notwithstanding the fact that the Democrats’ now complete abandonment of New Deal-style labor liberalism has actually helped create a climate in which reactionary extremism flourishes.

Barry is at pains to point out that 2015 is not 1968, mainly because there is no mass social insurgency, as there was back then. But I think he’s mistaken to argue that this difference alone requires us to have an orientation towards the Sanders campaign that is significantly different from the position we took on the Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy insurgencies. Even though there are today no movements in the streets or on the campuses that approach the scale of what we knew in the 60s, Americans in general are much more to the left than they were then. The gap between the policies of the political leadership and the preferences of the mass of ordinary people, as expressed in poll after poll, is immense; this was not so much the case in the 60s. Most importantly, after 30 years of neoliberalism and flagrant corporate domination, there is a far greater awareness of what’s wrong with the Democrats.

In 1968 we hoped the Peace and Freedom Party would attract those who opposed the Vietnam War, along with a substantial part of the Black community and its white allies. We opposed the McCarthy and Kennedy campaigns because they were meant to “set back the momentum of independent politics,” as Barry puts it. But we hoped to be able to draw McCarthy and Kennedy supporters towards independent political action, as long as we had a party structure in place and something politically attractive to offer them after Humphrey won the nomination at Chicago. As it turned out, the PFP essentially destroyed that momentum itself with the farcical campaign of Eldridge Cleaver and Jerry Rubin. It was a tragedy, and in my opinion a turning point in the degeneration and

eventual collapse of the 60s New Left – which in turned played a role in the conservative turn taken by U.S. politics in the 70s.

Prior to that hoped-for breakthrough, the PFP was actually no larger than the Greens are today and not nearly as well organized or experienced. But of course Barry is referring to the larger context of social upheaval in the 60s, of which the PFP was only a small expression. Nonetheless, it is as true today as it was in 1968 that a progressive insurgency *within* the Democratic Party will “set back the momentum of independent politics.” If leftists and leftward-moving people are scooped up in a dead end fight to transform the Democratic Party, or influence whatever mainstream candidate emerges from the primaries in the convention, this will be a setback that leaves many activists disoriented.

A momentum towards a break with the Democrats and a breakthrough towards independent political action, even in the absence of a mass social upheaval like that of the 60s, has been gathering, even if only in fits and starts, since the 1990s. To create an alternative to the Sanders campaign, is not, as Barry charges, a “sectarian incantation for preserving the cadre in the remote hope that this inspired few may yet ignite a political fuse.” The hope may be remote — though I think it’s not as far-fetched as Barry seems to believe — but we should not suspend the fight for a party of the left because of that. Our task is not to “preserve the cadre,” but to maintain, unambiguously, and to argue consistently for the perspective of a new political party that can advance the goals of today’s and tomorrow’s progressive struggles.

Sanders’ social democratic program is in some respects to the left of European social-democratic parties. In other respects, as many of his supporters have acknowledged, his program is marred by some glaring omissions, chiefly a failure to call for massive reductions in military spending. This is quite extraordinary, and quite revealing. Cutting military spending and transferring the funding to social programs such as education and universal health care is actually popular among the general population, as polls show. But it is heresy among the political elite, very much including the Democratic political establishment. This is a position that someone like Hillary cannot endorse even vaguely and as part of the usual pre-election demagoguery. A possible reason for Sander’s silence, at least in part, is that the military budget is a subject on which he does not want to distance himself too far from the Party leadership. Moreover, Sanders has had appallingly bad positions on many foreign policy issues, for example supporting the invasion of Afghanistan and Israel’s attack on Gaza. And he tends to submerge the fight against racism in a generalized class-based program – which means that he has little to offer to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Despite these glaring deficiencies, if Sanders had chosen to run as an independent, and if, as is highly unlikely, he eventually decides to break with the Party and run as an independent in the general election, a deeply compromised program would be no bar to supporting him, albeit very critically. As things stand, however, the Sanders insurgency amounts to considerably less than what Barry calls an “incipient rank and file mutiny,” if by that Barry means a mutiny against the neoliberal leadership of the Democratic Party. In the first place, what kind of a mutiny is it in which Fletcher Christian promises not even to criticize Captain Bligh and to rally around him if the mutiny fails? Recent news reports have Sanders implicitly criticizing Hillary Clinton, mainly on trade agreements, but only in response to audience questioning and accompanied by repeated assurances that he refuses to run a “negative personal” campaign. When pressed by reporters to criticize Hillary Clinton’s politics, Sanders again and again tries to change the subject to what’s wrong with the Republicans. At most he will admit to being “bewildered” by Clinton’s refusal so far, for example, to take a position on anti-worker trade deals. In other words, precisely when Hillary Clinton’s hypocrisy and demagoguery need to be exposed and ripped apart, Sanders voluntarily ties his own hands.

Barry writes: “Radicals should encourage [the Sanders movement] to struggle into the primaries and beyond, into the fall elections and after, in the Democratic Party through the primaries and –when

that fails – out, preferably with Sanders, but if need be, without.” He predicts the Sanders campaign “will rapidly assume a half-in, half-out posture towards the Democratic Party as it tries to expand its base in the teeth of fierce bipartisan resistance.” But it is wishful thinking to believe that Sanders supporters will move in this direction without the existence of an organized alternative *outside* the campaign that has been saying all along that fighting within the Democratic Party is self-defeating.

I agree with Barry that the Sanders movement can “make a lasting contribution to the development of an independent oppositional current in American politics – but only if it splits from the Democratic Party. He calls for holding Sanders’ “feet to the fire if he temporizes his stance against the Party establishment.” The trouble, as noted before, is that Sanders is only *implicitly* opposed to the Party establishment and persistently avoids taking on that establishment directly. Barry says that leftists working within the Sanders movement should “emphasize the unbridgeable gulf that exists between the Party they seek to attain and the Democratic Party as it actually exists.” But if the gulf is “unbridgeable” doesn’t that mean that the Sanders movement is fundamentally misdirected, and that we should say so?

Sanders is an appealing campaigner with a militant, even if limited, platform, at least on domestic issues. By suggesting through his action that the Democratic Party is reformable, he will bring disillusioned Americans back into its ranks. He will draw back to the Democratic fold activists who have become open to independent politics – in fact, he is already doing so, in a big way. After the Party selects its nominee, Sanders will likely make the case that there is no alternative to campaigning and voting for Hillary, or whoever, as the lesser evil to Scott Walker, Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush or whatever fiend the Republicans put forward. After devoting more than a year to the Sanders campaign, it will be hard for his followers to change course. Because they are in effect accepting the idea that the Democratic Party is the only game in town, many are likely instead to dig in and create some sort of permanent inner-party left wing – that is until it fizzles out as all its predecessors have done or is absorbed into the feeble Progressive Caucus, thus misdirecting and ultimately neutralizing progressive energies for yet another historical period.

The die is not cast; we still have an opportunity to sway many of Sanders’ supporters to abandon the Democratic Party. But already it is clear that Sanders is *re-legitimizing* a reform-from-within strategy on the left. Liberal and leftist writers will portray his campaign as “a serious war for the soul of the party,” as Jacob Swenson-Lengyel put in *In These Times* (website, May 13, 2015). We are sure to see an avalanche of this stuff during the next 17 months.

That doesn’t mean that third party supporters should adopt a hostile attitude toward Sanders supporters and make peremptory “demands” on them, as Barry seems to think they are doing now. Demands always imply some sort of ultimatum; we make them on our enemies, the bosses and the capitalist state, not our friends. On the contrary, as people who share their goals we *urge* Sanders supporters to make themselves independent of the Democratic Party – with or without Sanders himself. This is the approach that Howie Hawkins’ Green Party campaign for governor of New York took toward Zephyr Teachout’s primary challenge to Andrew Cuomo. Hawkins did not denounce Teachout, much less her supporters, but instead explained that the only way to defeat the policies Cuomo stands for is to build an independent party. Should the Greens have suspended their campaign when Teachout entered the race? Should they not have *urged* Teachout’s supporters to break with the Democrats *before* she lost the primary? I think Hawkins and the Greens did exactly the right thing, including urging Teachout and her supporters to change course after the primary and support Hawkins – which Teachout refused to do, but about half of her voters did.

Sanders can and will educate people about corporate rule and progressive reforms. But what he cannot do is educate them about the Democratic Party itself. We absolutely must have clarity on the issue of building a new party, even if it takes years. Sanders is opposed to this at the moment and is

highly unlikely to change. A great many independent party advocates have endorsed him and will work hard on his campaign; but they should remember that Sanders cannot endorse *them* and their goal of political independence as long as he pursues the course he is on.

So we should not be reluctant to say to Sanders supporters that what they are doing is self-defeating and therefore mistaken. But at the same time, we should say to them, in effect, "if you don't agree with us, at least fight consistently and openly within the Sanders campaign for political independence by declaring *now* that you will not support a mainstream Democrat like Hillary Clinton after the convention and by calling on Sanders to do likewise." In the meantime, we should urge them to actively support the Green Party's efforts to get on the ballots of as many states as possible in order to put an infrastructure in place for an independent candidate in 2016.